

## Red Dead Redemption 2 review.

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Warning: This review contains TOTAL spoilers for the game. I hide little here, if I leave something out it is because I don't think it is worth mentioning rather than I wish to hide it from the reader. If you have not played the game, I recommend doing so before reading this review.

When I was coming out of primary school (or in the US, elementary school) I picked up Red Dead Redemption for a very low price a couple of years after it had been released. I was young enough to not know the specifics of objectively good games, but old enough to have watched the basic Western films and to have wanted a game that fulfilled those fantasies. Even to my underdeveloped mind however, the first Red Dead Redemption (I have not played Revolver) did not set my world on fire, (it did not even start a flame in my heart.) I completed it thinking it was perhaps the only product out there that gave me what I felt I wanted, but aside from that, here was a rather flawed game in multiple ways. The characters often felt more like caricatures than real people, examples being the elixir salesman, or the Mexican rebel leader versus his General opponent. Even John's old gang compatriots like Bill Williamson were easy enough to dislike through their actions and tone of voice that you knew you had to shoot them, after you had crouched behind a waist high wall and shot 25 people from your invisible arsenal on your back. John Marston functioned as a Mad Max character, as being the only sane man often in this rather insane world. As Marston also had little characterisation, I felt little for him throughout, given he would do missions for all kinds during the main quest with little opportunity to express himself through doing them. Quite unlike the Street Crime side quests in the later L.A Noire, which left most of the tonally 'off' sections of that game out of the main plot, the annoying stuff in Red Dead Redemption was right on the main quest route and was mandatory to complete. The game took place far too late on in the 'decline of the frontier' timeline, diminishing its status as a western game, and the game reflected this through gameplay as well as story. Though you start with revolvers, for instance, the game throws superior modern pistols at you towards the end, far more effective in combat, but jarring with the fantasy many, including myself, bought the game for. It often feels like quite a lot of the interesting stuff had happened before you even begin playing as Marston, with him burying the remnants of an age long gone, rather than one just ending. Thus, Red Dead Redemption 1 is a flawed game that perhaps can show the limits of Rockstar's design philosophies at the time- balancing satire of a period depicted in game, with telling a serious moral story, is a tricky business, and one I'm honestly not sure Rockstar has ever gotten right. GTA San Andreas may be the best example of it, but Max Payne 3 and L.A Noire tell their stories seriously, with far less satire and clever jokes, and thus have the potential to have much greater impacts on the player than the total satire of, for example, GTA V. This is because trying to create a believable world is easier when you are not undermining yourself quite deliberately while doing it (I accept in some ways GTA is a parody, but it does try to make you care for its characters in some way). It is the serious style that Rockstar chose to make Red Dead Redemption 2, and one that takes it a step above its predecessor.

I don't think I can exaggerate enough how much more engaging Red Dead Redemption 2 is over its predecessor, in fact, comparing them, I felt at some points during playing the sequel, would be quite pointless other than them having the same name. At the very outset of starting with the Red Dead 2, you are in the mountains, escaping from the Law. Quite apart from improvements made to survival, combat and moral loops of gameplay in the first chapter, which will be discussed as they come up across the game, the game can also show its attempts at a far greater visual spectacle in a way the first game never can nowadays. Where the first game is brown as hell and looks thoroughly washed-out today (obviously hardware has improved,) I spent the first few hours of the game partly just admiring the spectacle of it all. This is a beautiful game visually, and the cinematic camera provided really helps to showcase the landscapes created for the player to explore either free roaming or on

missions. For the first chapter however, it is strictly the latter. The game does wait until the second chapter before letting you loose in its world, and a few other chapters will keep to a structure where there is little else to do than follow the main quest line. There have been a couple of reviews of the game where they state it takes a while for the game to 'take off the training wheels.' In fact, the game tightly controls the pacing, where it allows the game to not let the intensity drop as well as to teach you its mechanics (the former being the most important to those of us willing to learn without tutorials.) You are in a desperate situation- to allow the player to simply run around and do whatever would undermine that- you haven't got the time. Moreover, letting the player run around on their own would take them away from the key aims of the first chapter, learning about the men and women they are and travel with.

The people in your gang, as well as your player character, are one of the major focuses of the game, and you spend quite some time getting to know them in a way that far improves upon not only Rockstar's previous efforts at allies, but in a way quite far above what I can say about this particular genre of game, veering into others which have much higher standards (such as RPG's that we enjoy.) The gang is quite large, featuring not just the men with guns, but the women who run the camp domestically, the cooks, the reverend among others. But every character is known to the player, nobody is left out. The cook must have meat be brought to him, the children must be entertained, the young women can act as thieves. The main quests will cover doing missions for almost all of the gang members, but even if you miss going with any of them for a while, your character, Arthur Morgan, can wander around camp and have hundreds of conversations with all of them about their position in the plot and how they are feeling. Even main story missions will have you talking with someone before being whisked off somewhere else. The dialogue taking place over riding is just paced enough that you can just hold a button or key, switch on the cinematic camera and enjoy the dialogue and the view, and know that when the dialogue runs out, you will often be at your destination. Arthur does not like everyone in the camp, but with such a big group, that is understandable. You aren't going to like everyone, and you will agree or disagree with the character's liking or disliking of each other (Uncle and Pearson being the camp idiots, the former returning by not-so popular demand from the first game.) But they are loyal to each other, and when they kill the guy about to kill you, you are grateful and remember that.

At the head of the camp is Dutch Van Der Linde, a man who you only saw a shell of in the first game but was interesting and philosophical enough that you could imagine what he would be like in his younger years. From the first chapter, Dutch steps forward as a charismatic leader, who steers the camp in both its physical and mental direction. A heist has gone wrong in Blackwater to the point that the player is barred from there till the epilogue, but Dutch is determined to see them out. Arthur Morgan begins the game, as the player will likely do, totally loyal to Dutch. Dutch says the right things, and moreover, does the right things. One of the earliest missions involves stumbling across a rival gang, the O'Driscolls, shooting them and rescuing a woman inside their building in the snow, who this gang had murdered the husband of. Dutch shows the difference that makes the player feel more comfortable about being a criminal- there is no question you are one, but you never hurt anyone who didn't deserve it, and you take what you need, and little more. Dutch has a difficult job, balancing the survival of the gang with doing the right thing by the world. Though there are some in the camp who want the survival to take more precedence than it does, most notably Micah Bell, it is made clear he is a relatively new addition. Arthur, on the other hand has been there since the start. Totally loyal to Dutch, he (and the player thus) trusts that he and his effective partner Hossiah will do the right thing by the gang and see them to safety from the law. Being in a middle place (close to Dutch, but not close enough to make the decisions) puts the player at a certain disconnect, he can be a mentor to the younger members of the gang, but can take orders enough to follow the mission structure as he is told. There is a theme of responsibility to much of the missions, which will be teased out in subsequent chapters.

Once the gang has travelled out of the mountains in chapter 2, you arrive in your first of many camps. Quite unlike most games giving you a hub which you can travel to and from throughout the whole game, Red Dead 2 never gives you a base for long, you keep moving all the time. This is the first compromise of living the life that Arthur does- there is little permanence, only the photos on the 'wall' of a wagon providing shelter for where you sleep. The second compromise for much of the game is you can't choose who you rob. Many of the people in the towns (the first one being a typical film-esque western town known as Valentine) live unblemished lives, though others hide illegal activities in their stores. Robbing those guys, or other miscreants such as other gangs, feels good. They were doing wrong, and you have the chance to redeem them, as well as to make the money you need. Robbing basic decent folk, as the game requires you to do feels less nice. But you have to do it, because the gang needs money. They've lost the money from Blackwater, and thus must right themselves, get back on their feet. To do that, you can't be too picky about who you rob, but Arthur and the player accept that it's a good enough job to do. Even the debt collection missions, given by the German Leopold Strauss (who was not stated to be Jewish but definitely could have been stereotypically.) are against people who beg and were obviously leant to unfairly, knowing it was unlikely to see a return, but whatever, says Arthur. The gang needs the money, and these people were stupid enough to borrow and not repay. Unfortunately, the gang also happens make enemies not just in rival gangs, or the ever-looming spectre of the Government, but also in robbing the train of Leviticus Cornwall, a wealthy industrialist. In this, the Gang ultimately bites off more than it can chew, and Cornwall retaliates by attempting the kill gang members in Valentine, forcing them to move camp out of the area. Quite apart from the spectacle of shooting your way through the town, it does begin a trend- every population centre you enter, you are going, at some point, going to shoot your way through it at some point. Innocent people will be ducking for cover as you and your friends escape again and again from whoever wants to kill you. Cornwall does not forget either, beginning to fund the Pinkerton detective agency to pursue the gang ever harder. In retrospect, this is perhaps the point at which the fate of the gang is sealed, but Arthur still believes in Dutch enough to follow the idea that is just a setback, and the deliverance for the gang is forecoming.

You first meet the Pinkertons while learning to fish. Agents Milton and Ross (the latter the nemesis of John Marston in Red Dead 1) surprise Arthur as he teaches Jack Marston on the shores of the idyllic lake you have camped on the side of. The image could not be more perfect, the contrast between the weather-beaten man and the smart city-dressed officials. Though they point a gun at Arthur, he and the player know that judging by the game's logic they can destroy the agents with one flick of the revolver. What they can't do, try as they might, is destroy the forces that drive them. The money and the powers that be have decided that Dutch and the gang should be destroyed. They offer Arthur a deal: Betray the gang or die with them. With Arthur refusing, the result is now nigh-on inevitable. Now, it is a race against time for the gang to get enough money to escape the country and seek another life abroad. This raising of the stakes has technically been in force from the beginning of the game, but it waits until here to fully elucidate itself and for the gang to fully realise the forces against them. It is also the first time Arthur begins to see problems with what the gang is doing. The basic premise of the chapter is Dutch attempting to play both sides of the two families with influence in the Rhodes area, the Grays and the Braithwaite, which takes a lot of influence from the basic premise of 'For a Fistful of Dollars' (1964) itself based upon 'Yojimbo.' Arthur, however, takes as much time helping Dutch and the gang as he does helping Romeo and Juliet (Beau and Penelope from the rival families) cement their love and get away. The two young adults have rejected the petty squabbles of their respective families and feel their embrace crashing down upon them. In a mission I thought might send the game into uncharted waters tonally, we visit a women's suffrage protest. The marks of progress in a town refusing to change with the times (the gang's black members face increased problems in this chapter) is an uplifting one and helping the two to escape in chapter 4 is a happy moment for Arthur and the player, though you would think with all of their

cousins you had mown down they could have just inherited their families wealth and changed everything from there, though that would not be the point. They have the power to choose a different life. Did Arthur get to choose? In a moment of separation between the player character and the player, we learn in chapter 2 that Arthur had a sweetheart, who's family would not let him marry her. She is drawn back into his life because of her husband's death, and he helps her with her family problems, and they get slowly affectionate again. As they begin to like each other once again, we are told that her no-good father had forbidden the two to be together. Now that he is dealt with, with Arthur saving him from gambling trouble, that is not the end of the matter. Arthur is a wanted man; he can't run away with her like she wants him to. Besides, he is loyal to the gang above all else. Beau and Penelope can run away, but for some men, what they have done and who they are cannot be erased. Despite several characters saying that America is the land of second chances, such chances cannot be for everyone forever.

The manipulating of both families by Dutch (for hidden treasure, which apparently exists....) goes horribly wrong, and you have to shoot your way out of Rhodes, in which Sean, one of the gang (and likeable to boot), is killed. Soon after, Jack Marston is kidnapped, making Dutch, Arthur and the gang massacre the Braithwaite's in a scene reminiscent of the Baxters' facing a similar treatment, right up to the point of the woman head of the household emerging from the wreckage. This raises the stakes further, with the first loss of the gang hardening everyone, including the player, for who is going to be next. This is a repeat failure of the gang, and Dutch, and the 'trust me' of Dutch begins to grow ever more suspect, along with his outlandish promises that the gang will once again, have to save up more money and then escape, to Tahiti of all places! Why Tahiti? Because there is no more space for the gang to go. It is quite clear that America is no longer for them, and why not? While this gang spends more time killing people on missions than it does getting money (given repeated failures at getting the money) you can understand the argument as to why such people had to go. In admitting they need to get out the country, they subconsciously admit this to themselves. Dutch, Hosiah and Arthur take a fishing trip in which they reminisce about the olden days. But these are merely personal anecdotes, covering up much of the business of the olden days, which is robbing and killing those who resist. The gang can offer up the excuse that the guards could just let them get away with it, or they knew what they were getting into, but such excuses will ring hollow as massacres pile up. The game does not, in these early stages, offer up a real excuse as to the goodness of a gang that the player belongs to. It offers two ideas to stop you from wondering what the point of it all is. Firstly, it is about helping the characters you like get through, and maybe escape. Arthur attracts sympathy by rescuing a German family in their new camp spot, before finding another, better one. By the beginning of chapter 4, you should know and like almost every member of the gang, and those you don't like, Micah for instance, you get on with because he wants the same as you and is efficient at achieving it. The other way the game convinces you to carry on being invested once you've realised it won't end well is to give you a look at the alternative.

Chapter 4 gives you Saint Denis, and the city itself is awful. It is not awful in the way the new Nazi Dystopias from nu-Wolfenstein are or Dunwall from Dishonored 1, i.e it is not filled with Nazis or plague victims etc. but to be honest, it might as well be. The city is such a change of environment for the worse that everything is more annoying there, from the narrow streets, the pedestrians walking in said streets, to the general noise and bustle that greets you every time you go there. This sounds inoffensive enough, but the design genius here was putting this so far along in the game. You have never been in a city so far as Arthur Morgan- you have spent your time in free open country, enjoying the picturesque views that the visual design is so good at producing at every opportunity. Now you can see the new America, and what a world without the free-roaming gang would be like, and you revolt from it. Skirmishing with corrupt politicians and mafioso bosses, you feel a little in an alien world. It really does refocus the mind upon achieving the goals of the gang. You and Arthur don't want to live in this world, do you? (partially because for most of us, we already do.) It also

creates a small heart-wrench when Mary Linton, Arthur's childhood sweetheart, asks him to run away with her once more, following a 'normal date' designed to show the benefits of living like this. The player knows that it would be best for Arthur if he left with Mary, but he can't, he's a wanted man, and besides, the player can still be addicted to the lifestyle Arthur leads, even if Arthur is tired of it. As for the narrative, the gang focuses itself again on attempting to play the loyalty of Angelo Bronte, but Bronte deceives them with a false tip-off, causing a massacre in the city, and the O'driscolls attack the camp, now at Shady Belle. These events again tighten the noose on the gang, raising events to a fever pitch so much that they throw everything onto the 'one last job cliché' - robbing a major bank in the city. However, Dutch begins to show the signs that the pressure of leading the gang to its nirvana of Tahiti is beginning to slip on him a little. He takes the betrayal by Bronte as a personal slight, and hours of mission time are spent on a mission to go kill him, something Arthur feels contradicts what Dutch has previously said on revenge. Dutch justifies this by talking of the power Bronte has over the city, but many do. Bronte only said he had the power- you've felt his effects little else, and Arthur questions the motives, before going along with it, and so does the player in turn. After all, it is pretty easy to see Dutch's side of things and Bronte, through the power of English translation subtitles, is someone who you don't feel too bad about putting into the ground, even if the extremity of the death, by drowning and then fed to an alligator does nothing for Dutch's case. When the job comes around, most of the camp is in on it. It really feels as though the climax is upon us.

Happily, or sadly, we are far from done. The job goes horribly wrong. The city police are waiting for the gang, and Hosiah is captured and killed by the Pinkertons. Lenny, a man Arthur has been helping effectively mentor during his missions, is also killed in the gunfire. John Marston gets captured (I originally thought, to be placed with his family to position for the beginning for RDR1, I couldn't have been more wrong about that.) Dutch, Arthur, Bill Williamson and Javier escape, with the take from the raid ending up at the bottom of the Ocean, and following a storm on their ship, they end up on the island of Guarma, and immediately thrust into a rebellion of natives versus their white overlords. This, for me is the game's weakest chapter, not so much for the change in rhythm, I don't mind where here, as elsewhere, the game takes a linear path and encourages you to just follow the main missions. It was more that attempting to keep the tension at fever pitch following the bank heist and the escape was a choice that didn't pay off for me, and escalating the combat to firing cannons at ships and mowing down hundreds of soldiers was a little much for what I thought Arthur was capable of, especially since I appreciated the lack of such huge amounts of enemies, especially at the start of the game- a welcome change for the genre in my opinion. In addition, the rebels are pretty darn good versus the evil Governor- not completely, but enough to be a little basic for a game with allies and enemies so nuanced. I understand why they went to Guarma it- it shows, if it wasn't obvious before, that Dutch's ideal of a tropical paradise just waiting for the gang is an impossible dream. The big strength of the chapter is further showing Dutch and Arthur's growing disconnect. Arthur is now, while loyal, unconvinced by every new plan that Dutch comes up with, and on the evidence presented to the player and where they are now-why not? Dutch's plans have achieved very little. Many are dead, and they are stranded in this God-forsaken place. It's more uncomfortable for Arthur when Dutch murders the old lady leading them through the caves to rescue Javier, who has been captured. She was asking for more money, but there was no reason to kill her, Arthur reasons. However, Dutch has a point, he is just doing his best, and it is for the survival of the gang, and overall, the plan Dutch concocts to get back to America does pay off. Arthur does often wonder whether Dutch has changed, or just Arthur is seeing things a little differently now. There are clear arguments for both sides, one of the greatest strengths of the game, and I couldn't give you a complete answer at this stage. Mercifully the chapter is short, and does what it intends to do, but it is a relief when one gets back to America and normal service resumes.

When Arthur gets to America again, and begins riding on a stolen horse through the night, the game begins playing a quasi-gospel song, with the lyrics to the chorus being 'May I, May I stand unshaken, amidst a crashing world.' This line could sum up the game as a whole, but it particularly relates to chapter 6, the best of them all. The song begins the chapter in a reflective mood, and a sense that things are beginning to move towards their inevitable conclusion, finally. But the game will not, to its credit, be rushed. I do wonder whether many will even get as far as chapter 6, but it is absolutely worth it, especially with the Arthur I had journeyed with. Arriving at the reunited gang's camp, Dutch begins once more to plot the gang's escape-one more train heist and then, away. Arthur is too jaded at the point to really believe him. But there are two new important figures in the gang now. Micah, always the bloodthirsty one, has attached himself to Dutch's similar instincts and is preying upon them to rise further in the ranks, and Dutch now listens to him more than Arthur. More interestingly, the woman that you saved in the very first chapter, Miss Sadie Adler, became much the leader in Dutch and Arthur's absence, and was responsible for keeping the gang together while Dutch was away. Though she still suffers from impulsive revenge cravings, most notably against the O'Driscolls who killed her husband, she shows a far greater respect for life and the right thing to do, as Dutch succumbs to Micah's influence. This is most notably shown in the Balloon mission to break John Marston out of prison, something that Dutch insists he was going to do.... But that's doubtful. Dutch now insists upon loyalty to him, whereas previously he compelled nobody to stay with him. Without love, Dutch turns to fear to control the gang, and that has its effects on everyone. Everyone is more desolate, sad and more 'on edge' than ever. When Miss O'Shea drunkenly announces she betrayed the gang at Saint Denis because Dutch had been neglecting her, she is gunned down by other gang members. The rats are beginning to eat each other, and that leaves Arthur in a difficult position, especially with one of the game's final stings.

The onset of tuberculosis for Arthur was a stroke of design genius to me. Though I knew beforehand that Arthur might meet his maker, I had held out hope that the multiple endings provided would allow him to escape, even if that was only guaranteed karmically. The illness, however, means that you only have so long with Arthur before he leaves life, and the player behind. Gameplay-wise it barely affects Arthur, which is a good choice for an end-game scenario. Changes made to the third-person combat (better enemy A.I, more bullet impact and sound effects, reduction of weapons you can carry at once and reducing accuracy of them) mean Arthur already feels fragile enough in a fight without the illness. However, story-wise, it places the effect of Arthur wondering what legacy he will leave behind. It is too late for him, but not for everyone else. This perspective is in stark contrast to your earlier one, where for example, you collected the debts for Strauss because you had to, it was a mission, and it was fun to see Arthur to get all tough with people, even if you felt a little shitty for it. Now? It's most rewarding helping the families you ruined to leave their current surroundings and try again. Some of them are persistent in hating you-one family who's father died as a result of your actions has made the mother into a whore and the son to be a bullied workhorse stands out in particular. It takes 3 gruelling missions of them throwing well-deserved abuse at them before they take your money and leave for a better life. Is this absolution? Arthur says he does not want their forgiveness. Does he want God's? He claims not to be religious. What he wants to do is to soothe his conscience, and to some extent, maybe the player does too, before you die. It makes you think about how many you have killed that was your choice, and how many you killed because you were told to. Dutch's gang missions could be excused because of the latter-the game told you had to kill those people. But the debts you never had to recover, and that's why its so good to chuck Strauss out of the camp after absolving all the families of their burdens. Is it a little whimsical? Perhaps, but it feels damn good. At the end of the day, Colm O'Driscoll's eyes widen as he realises his options are closed and he's dead meat, is the exact opposite of how the player wants Arthur to feel when his moment comes. He knows Dutch's plan is not going to work, and he knows the gang is done for. What he wants and secures is the future. John Marston, reconciled to Arthur, and his family, is

persuaded by Arthur to get out when the time is right, among others. While all this is going on, the last of the game's conflicts is proceeding at breakneck pace.

The game never has Arthur going to see a priest, a cliché that I was glad to see not present. Instead, Arthur has Rains Fall, a Native American chief who, like Dutch and Arthur, has had their lands destroyed and been forced to move time and time again, and soon will have to continue that process, due to army demands. Arthur spends a lot of time with him, and as the pair talk, Arthur sees much value in what he says, despite admitting that months ago he would have just thought him weak. Rains Fall's ideology is peace, and he encourages Arthur to make peace with himself. He is not a warrior; he does not care for bloodshed. He disagrees with the logic that life is a will to power- he sees greater strength in enduring, and in enduring, we grow strong (to quote PST.) This places him as an opposite to Dutch. Whereas Dutch goes and kills Leviticus Cornwall in cold blood, for very little justification (the Pinkertons were going to get funded anyways) whereas Rains Fall responds to his holy artefacts being taken by exhorting Arthur to not kill anyone in taking them back, a mighty challenge given 90% of Arthur's abilities involve killing things (though thankfully stealth is improved in this game versus Rockstar's earlier ones, even if it is no Splinter Cell or MGS.) However, Dutch attempts to feed the bloodlust of Eagle Flies, the son of Rains Fall to attack the army, hoping to cause distractions from the gang. This short-term sacrifice of life is easy to see and pits Arthur against Dutch, the former working effectively without Dutch's knowledge (now a problem in Dutch's authoritarian gang.) The missions with Eagle Flies and Dutch's blatant manipulation of him work against the peace efforts of Rains Fall, and in the end, all looks lost for the old chief as his son is wounded and killed as a result of his efforts to turn the might of the US government (or at least a detachment claiming to represent it) back away from the Indians. The contrast between the gang and the Indians is quite clear, as are many of the other gangs present in the area; their murdering anything that gets in the way of their survival creates the contrasts in the player's brain. But Dutch only thinks for his gang, and increasingly, only thinks for himself and Micah's devilish whisperings, calling the others traitors when they know the end is coming and get out while they can. During the train heist, Dutch leaves Marston to die, Arthur to get captured, several times, and finally, refuses to save Abigail Marston, as he had refused to save John earlier on. This is the straw that breaks the camel's back, and as Arthur and Sadie Adler rescue Abigail and kill Agent Milton, the latter reveals the final twist of Arthur's story- Micah was the one working for the Pinkerton's-nobody else.

It's a good reveal, and I was surprised by it, having assumed, as the game intended, that that thread was gone with Miss O'Shea. It was a perfect set-up too. Micah had always said what a survivor he was and ensuring his survival at everyone else's expense was the right thing to do in his eyes. However, when Arthur goes back to the camp, they mostly do not listen to him. Bill and Javier among others are still loyal to Dutch, and like many a failing ideology, think that if everyone stopped complaining, they could make it all work out still. Perhaps that could lend the argument that Dutch could have made it work if it weren't for Micah? Maybe, if you have sympathy for Dutch, but I don't. His fall in Guarma was without Micah, Micah just helped it along. However, as Arthur has just allowed himself a ride where he realises he is at peace, knowing what he has tried to do to rectify all the bad he has done (a brilliant scene) it sets up the end of all epics- a one-on one duel where the two ideologies clash. Arthur knows he isn't going to make it out alive. He rejects the money, knowing John's life is more important and wishes him well. Fighting Micah, he protests to Dutch that he gave everything to him, and Dutch, with this last plea piercing him, refuses to finish Arthur and walks away, even if he still does not believe Arthur about the fact Micah was working with the enemy. This knowledge that Dutch is not wholly gone, and the fact that John and everyone else has got away, consoles Arthur as he takes his last breaths. Killing Micah is not important. He will never die at peace as Arthur gets to. The deer that Arthur dreams of in the wilderness (dependant on honour level) cannot come back. There will be no more Old West as he wanted. But he knows that those he cares

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for will see the new one, and that is all that matters now. It's a sad death, but I was convinced it was the right one for Arthur, and it seals away the story far better than all the others, I'm sure.

The epilogue chapters would be DLC in many another game, and I'm happy that Rockstar included them with the main game. Thematically though they are separate from Arthur's story, focusing instead on the choices that John has to make. In the first chapter, the question is over how much of a choice John has to use his skills acquired from his gang days? But these are straightforwardly asked, and the player will generally take John's side rather than agreeing with Abigail. The building of John's house and the elementary ranching are all great, as is the dialogue between the married couple. Uncle is as annoying as ever, of course, but seeing Sadie as a bounty hunter raises interesting questions about the morality of capturing people who may well be innocent, and hunting down old gang members like John. There is a healthy dose of irony that John used to rob banks and now he is in debt to them, and he used to claim the bounty's of killers, now only accountants. But there is a great satisfaction in knowing this is what Arthur died for. And that John and Abigail at the end of the game are happy. The final mission is great too, culminating in the game's final twist, the reveal of Dutch, and his shooting of Micah. The lesson it gives is ambiguous. Maybe Dutch had finally seen through Micah's act? Maybe he sacrificed him for his own survival? Who knows? The redemption is complete, and the cycle has come to close on itself, if only to re-open when the first game's narrative begins soon after.

I tend to judge pieces of media, such as films and games, on a graph with the axis 'do I care' and 'What lessons does this try to teach' in a basic sense. It is clear that Red Dead 2 fulfils both of these scales extremely well- I absolutely did care what happened to almost every character in the game, and the lessons of the game were so widespread coming from the moral standings of each and every character, and indeed, though I thought I played the game the way it wished for me to, perhaps I would be surprised of an evil Arthur's musings and the lessons that would teach me (somehow I doubt it, in the same way some games just have to be played good-PST being the best example.) The game does, as the marketing material will tell you, show the sad downfall of an old society, but the game does offer you alternative after alternative about how to live in this world and what society should be like, through Dutch, Micah, Rains Fall and the Pinkertons among many others. This is in marked contrast to other games, which also show broken societies- The Division 2, Far Cry 5 and Fallout 76 as examples. All of them show off dramatically broken societies, but all of them let you the player place your template of a good society upon it, without comment or judgement. This makes for tedious boredom, allowing for the notion that everyone is basically good, and it's just 'A.N.Other' to destroy. Red Dead 2 questions this constantly, marking it out from other games in the current Zeitgeist, though it might force it to seem dated in future.

But Red Dead 2 also has one more interesting point- it never wants to evangelise the lifestyle the characters lead. The characters will murder, but other vice? Like drugs and sex? Very few-there is surprisingly little of the latter and no, I'm not just looking for dopamine hits, but it is questionable how sanitised the lifestyle can be at times.) There are limits to the evil which perhaps should be let loose for such a serious game in other ways.) Then there is Arthur's illness. Tuberculosis has been largely wiped out (yes it is on the rise again in the US) by modern medicine, it is extremely uncommon in countries with robust healthcare systems such as the UK. The decision to give Arthur it is to provide a question mark to anyone wanting to do this for real-who looks at Arthur Morgan and thinks 'this is so much more fun than my life' because who wouldn't think that? But there is a trade-off, it is foolish to think there is a gain in all areas. Not that it is not possible, but people can realise why the Old West died, because it was either them or it, and they were tired of just surviving-they wanted to thrive, as the gang never does, they just talk about it. Just as human beings today would be far less well-equipped to fight in the WW1 Western Front, it is folly to suggest we could simply



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step into the Old West again, without significant adjustment, danger and the feeling that nothing will ever be normal again, with no turning back, and if there is an unequivocal message one can take from Red Dead Redemption 2, it is 'Don't try this at home, without significant warning.'

Thank you for reading.